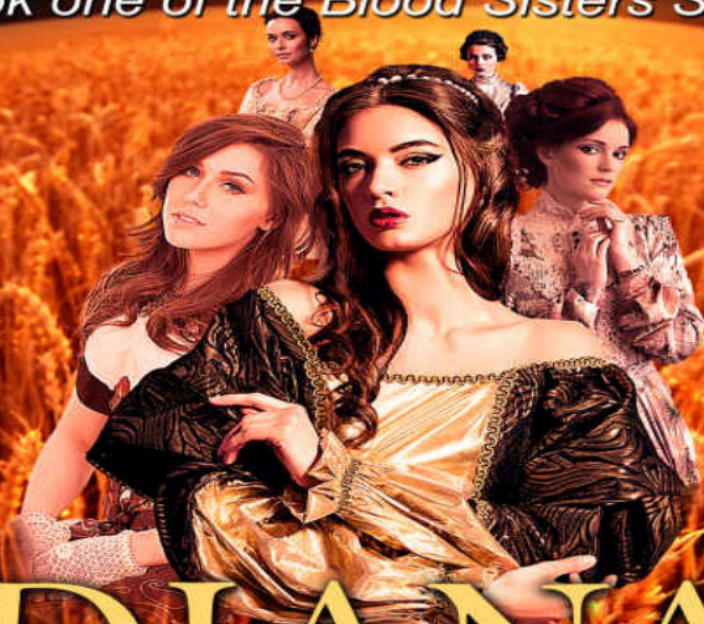


MAIL ORDER BRIDE

*Bridget*  
*A Father's Daughter*

*Book one of the Blood Sisters Series*



DIANA  
NICHOLAS

A Clean Western Historical Romance

**BRIDGET, A FATHER’S DAUGHTER**

**Diana Nicholas**

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**To all lovers of historical fiction, who by reading help to keep the stories of those brave men and women alive.**

## Chapter one

Bridget peered out the bay window at the landscape surrounded by over grown maple trees and untrimmed grass. The ranch deteriorated every year and it pained her to watch, knowing how much it would have devastated her father.

It was difficult to imagine that ten years earlier, Peak Hill had been a thriving ranch, with several hundred heads of cattle. The only sign now that the ranch had once been active were the empty barns, their roofs leaking when it rained. She ached for those days when she galloped after her father and together, they would assist the ranch hands to bring the cattle in.

Bridget closed her eyes and recalled the surge of joy as she and her mare raced at breathtaking speeds, jumping over small bushes. No matter how much she longed for the past, it would not return. She was to blame for her father's death. No one said it aloud, but it was there, hanging low like a dark cloud. Their father had lost interest in the ranch.

He had dismissed all the ranch hands and the cattle had grown too thin for the market. Bitterness swirled in her mouth at the memory of how quickly things had altered. The gloom that had settled over their father had grown worse, eventually corroding his mind, so that reality and fantasy became intertwined. They lost him a year ago.

Each of them had coped in different ways. For Bridget, riding Bigger, her father's old stallion soothed her pain. Her sisters' loud voices broke through her musings.

"I really don't understand why we have to resort to this."

Bridget recognized her sister Catherine's voice.

"Let's not go back to that," Agatha snapped.

Agatha was the first born and never let anyone of them forget it. The idea had been Isabella's and it sickened Bridget. The very thought of going to marry a stranger! Surely they were not that desperate.

Except that in her rational mind, Bridget knew that they were—five sisters and a child, with no prospects for marriage. If they did not do this, they would die old women in the ranch but worse, Sophia would not have a future.

A soft hand touched her arm lightly. Bridget did not have to turn to know that it was Catherine.

“Come Bridget, we’re waiting for you and Isabella,” she said in a low voice which strangers found difficult to hear.

“I suppose she’s in front of a mirror,” Bridget said.

Catherine laughed and led Bridget to one of the cushioned parlor chairs. In the middle of the five chairs, was a stool that held a bowl. Bridget gazed at it with barely concealed terror. Isabella walked in then, sashaying across the room and making a production out of sitting down. She smiled at all of them demurely as though all was well.

Bridget felt a fleeting resentment towards her sister. Isabella was as much to blame as she was. It had also been her idea that the sisters reply to adverts from gentlemen in the west searching for wives. Bridget had reluctantly agreed. It had seemed so farfetched at the time. Now that the time had come, it terrified her knowing her life could change in an instant. Isabella caused a lot of trouble, Bridget mused with mounting irritation and fright. Knowing the futility of such thoughts, Bridget pushed them away from her mind.

“Ready?” Agatha asked, her arms arranged neatly on her lap.

Bridget gave a curt nod, as did everyone.

“We’ll pick the papers according to our ages. I’ll go first,” Agatha continued in her bossy voice.

Bridget noticed her older sister’s shaky hand as she picked out a folded paper. Isabella was next, her manner calm, her facial expression one of not caring much for the outcome. Bridget took deep inhaleds and flexed her right hand. Then she reached into the basket and picked out the paper that her fingers first touched.

Maud picked hers, leaving a single paper which Catherine picked.

“Shall we open them?” Agatha said in a shaky voice which betrayed her emotions.

Bridget unfolded hers. She stared unbelievably at the words written in capital letters. She wanted to weep and throw herself on the ground.

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She slumped back into the chair. The others did not need to ask who had gotten the paper.

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Agatha’s lips were pressed tight. She had been so sure that she would be the first to get married, and now this! She was the first born at twenty four years and she could feel the years getting on. She thought of remaining a spinster all her life and her legs melted. Agatha wanted nothing more than to get married and have her own family.

She was born to be a mother. How unfair that her younger sister should be the one to get married first! If there was one sister who did not want to become a mail order bride, it was Bridget.

It had been Agatha’s idea to cast lots to decide which of the sisters would be the first to get married.

How foolish! If only she had kept her big mouth shut. In her mind, she had been confident that she would be the one. She looked at Bridget and her feelings of resentment ebbed away. She felt a wave of sympathy for her. Bridget had been the most vocal about her disapproval for the idea.

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Isabella lowered her eyes to hide her triumph. Her heart pounded hard against her chest. How she would have hated to be the one to go first. Sure it had been her idea that the sisters’ should become mail order brides. She had only suggested it because it was

her fault that her sisters had no marriage prospects in Raymond Terrace.

She had lain awake most nights, the terror of marriage to a stranger keeping her awake. Isabella, like Bridget, had no interest in marriage. She, unlike Bridget, liked men. She found them captivating and a refreshing change from female company. The only trouble came in marriage.

All the gentlemen who advertised for brides were mostly interested in having a woman to sire their heirs. The thought of childbirth and all it entailed made her dizzy. The only way to avoid it was to remain a spinster. She was free for now—until the next time they had to pick lots again.

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Maud did not care either way. As far as she was concerned, it was something that the sisters had to do. They could not continue living in the farm house with no plan for the future. She was glad, albeit surprised when Isabella had come up with the idea. Seeing the wisdom of it, she had supported her sister until all the others came round.

Had Maud picked the deciding lot, she would have taken Sophia with her. She hadn't told her sisters her plans seeing no reason to tell them before but she would not have left Sophia behind. Sophia was Maud's reason for existing, for wanting to improve their lives.

She would do anything to ensure Sophia's future was secure and Maud knew it would not happen in West Virginia. Sophia would never be ostracized from society. Maud's plan was for Sophia to grow up happy and when the time came, have young men of good reputation courting her.

She looked at Bridget's white pinched face and felt sorry for her. She itched to squeeze Bridget's hand in solidarity but her sister did not invite that kind of intimacy. She held herself aloof and most times it was impossible to know what was on Bridget's mind. Sometimes, Maud suspected Bridget had no feelings about anything in life.



Catherine's hands would not stop trembling. She was so relieved that she could have wept. She would have detested being parted from Agatha and Sophia. She felt protected and safe when Agatha was around. She felt a little guilty at her joy, because though she hid it well, Catherine knew that Agatha would have loved to be going off to the West as a mail order bride.

Despite her hard exterior, Agatha was a romantic. Catherine on the other hand, liked her life as it was. She loved her life and as the last born, she had very few memories of their mother. Everyone said that she resembled their mother the most. That may have been true, but to Catherine, Agatha felt like her real mother. The sound of Sophia's soft laugh rang out from the kitchen and Catherine's heart melted. She loved Sophia from the moment she had held her in her arms, her little face pink and her small bright eyes searching.

Sophia was a part of her as legs or hands were. When Catherine woke up, the first thing she thought of was of Sophia. She fretted when Sophia was ill, feeling ill herself. She let her muscles relax, knowing that she, Sophia and Agatha were safe for now.

## Chapter two

“C’mon!” Bridget cried urging Bugger, her father’s old stallion to a full gallop.

He did not increase his speed. His lungs and heart were not as strong as they once were and he tired easily. She pressed her thighs on his sides as they approached the shiny new wire fence that signaled the abrupt end of their land. It had been her father’s idea to sell off half of the land. Bridget had protested strongly, even knowing that they had no choice but to sell.

The money decreased every week. Bridget’s vision grew blurry and she gripped the reins. Bugger, sensing her discomfort came to a complete standstill.

“Oh Bugger,” Bridget cried and fell on the horse’s back in a disheveled heap. “What will I do? I can’t bear to leave Peak Hill.”

She allowed the tears she kept under a tight rein to fall down her cheeks. How had everything gone so wrong? Peak Hill had been a thriving Beef cattle farm with buyers coming from West Virginia and beyond to admire the fat animals. Isabella shouldered most of the blame but then so did all her other sisters and yet, none of them had asked for it; they had not actively gone out to destroy their lives.

Such thoughts were futile now, she thought and pushed herself to an upright position. What was done was done. No amount of regrets or rearranging the past would change anything. Her father was dead and Peak Hill was a shadow of its glorious past.

Bridget looked up at the grey skies gathering. Soon it would rain, but now the weather meant nothing. There was no hay to sow or harvest, no trips into town to buy supplies for the ranch. She urged Bugger to a trot and turned back the way she had come. In the only barn that had signs of life, she slid off the saddle and proceeded to brush the stallion down. With that done, she patted his mahogany brown mane and made her way to the farm house. A drop of rain fell

on her arm.

It got lonely in Peak Hill, especially for her sisters. For Bridget, the lack of invitations to dances in the neighboring farms did not in fact bother her. Maud did not care much either. But for Agatha, Isabel and Catherine, it was like a sword to their sides, hearing about another party they had been snubbed.

Sophia's sharp childish scream pierced the silence just as Bridget's hand touched the door knob. She quickly pushed it open and ran past the cellar door and into the kitchen.

"Sophia—" Bridget yelled.

"What happened?" Agatha said rushing into the kitchen, quickly followed by Isabella and Catherine.

"It's Maud!" Mrs. Jones, their housekeeper cried, glaring at Maud. She held Sophia against her chest. "She dragged in a bloodied rabbit and scared the child half to death."

Brigitte noticed the drops of blood from the doorway to the sink. Her eyes moved to Maud's blue skirts, caked with mud and wet from the rain.

"Maud, why didn't you bleed it outside?" Agatha demanded.

Maud spoke, her back to them, her hands dipped in the rabbit's innards. "It's raining."

Agatha made a clicking noise with her tongue but did not pursue the matter. The truth was that Maud's hunting expeditions provided them with much needed meat, which meant that they rarely had to buy from the butcher in town.

"Here, let me take her," Catherine said and took a whimpering Sophia into her arms.

Sophia was passed round to the sisters like a church collection bowl. Bridget was the last to hold her. She inhaled the sweet scent of shampoo in Sophia's hair. She looked up then and met her sisters' eyes. They all worried about the same thing though none of them had voiced it. What would happen to Sophia as each of them went off to

get married.

“The last of us will take Sophia with her,” Agatha said, as if reading Bridget’s thoughts.

“Shouldn’t the mother take her?” Mrs. Jones spoke up, her mouth curled in disapproval.

“This is between us Mrs. Jones,” Agatha said, her hands on her hips.

Mrs. Jones snorted. “Your mother would turn in her grave.”

The statement did not have any effect on any of them apart from Agatha who had the grace to bow down. The rest of them hardly remembered their mother. She had died in labor, giving birth to Catherine.

“Very well, I shall mind my own business,” Mrs. Jones said in a hurt voice.

She had been with them for as long as Bridget could remember and at one point she and her sisters had thought she was sweet on their father. The only time she had taken a long absence was the year after Sophia was conceived. The sisters had made a pact. What happened to one of them was everyone’s burden to bear. None of them would be shunned for birthing a child out of wedlock. Mrs. Jones had returned to find a six month old baby and no identifiable mother. Their father had taken the secret to his grave and all of them had vowed to do the same. Sophia belonged to each of them.

When she wanted a cuddle, she went to Agatha, and when she wanted a story told to her, she went to Catherine. When she needed a walk, she took it with Bridget and when it was bedtime, Maud tucked her in.

“Down Bi-git,” Sophia said in her baby voice, wriggling her tiny three year old body.

“Alright,” Bridget said with a chuckle and lowered her.

“Bridget, we’ve found the right gentleman,” Catherine said, clapping her hands together. “We think he’s the one. Come and see

the advert. His name is Alexander Baron and he owns a ranch in Butte, Montana.”

Bridget’s ears cocked. “A ranch, what do they rear?”

“You ought to inquire in a letter,” Catherine suggested.

Agatha listened to the exchange without comment.

Bridget shrugged. She had no interest whatsoever in which gentleman they had found, though a ranch did sound at least inviting.

“Aren’t you interested in the man you shall marry?” Catherine asked, her brown eyes wide with shock.

“I agreed to do it but I’ll have no part in writing letters or reading them,” Bridget snapped and stormed off.

She knew she was behaving like a child but she could help it. She was just so frightened. She stalked to the end of the hallway, turned left to a smaller foyer and to the bedroom she shared with Maud. She made straight for the window and mounted the window seat that overlooked the front of the house. Bridget pulled her skirt around her, wrapped her hand around her knees and rocked back and forth in quick jerky movements.

Sometimes it felt as though the numbing fear she felt would consume her. Bridget felt as if too much was expected from her. The feeling was similar to drowning. She couldn’t breathe and her brain refused to formulate coherent thought. Her rocking movements decreased and slowly her heartbeat slowed down.

## Chapter three

Alexander Baron fidgeted in the small parlor chair, designed for ladies rather than a six foot man. His mother sat bolt upright in her writing desk in an alcove off the wall. She was of slight build and a stranger looking at both of them would find it difficult to believe she had birthed him. Her once blond hair was now faded to gray while his was coal black.

He took after his father, Juan Ballon, a Mexican rancher who had immigrated to the West, struck a gold vein and bought a huge spread for himself. Unable to find Mexican girl in Butte, Montana, his father had befriended his mother on a trip to the East in search of markets for his cattle. Like him, she had been raised in a ranch and the two of them, despite their different backgrounds, had had a happy marriage. The only concession his mother had insisted on was that his father change his surname to the English version 'Baron' of which he readily agreed.

Alexander unbuttoned the top button of his workman's shirt in an effort to cool his body. The parlor was hot and almost airless. It was his least favorite room and he avoided it as much as he could. The table in the center was draped in a heavy blue and gold velvet cloth as were the windows, which darkened the room. Everything about the room was overdone.

"I have picked the most suitable lady and I'm sure that you'll approve," his mother said in the silvery tone she adapted when speaking of matters she considered grave. "We don't want just any girl becoming the Lady of Windy Willows Ranch, now do we?"

The name Charlotte Turner sat between them, unspoken.

Beautiful, flirtatious, Charlotte—the reason why his mother had decided that a mail order bride was the best solution for ending his bachelorhood. Once, he had believed that he and Charlotte had a future together. He knew better now. When his mother had brought up the idea, after skirting around the topic for several evenings, he

had agreed as he did with most things she requested of him.

As long as she did not interfere with his running of the ranch, Alexander had no quarrel with her and they got along splendidly. His mother worried needlessly. He had no intention of marrying Charlotte. As close as he and his mother were, they did not speak of matters of the heart.

She handed him a letter. "Take a look at this."

Alexander took the single sheet of paper, noted the neat, laddish handwriting and the name at the bottom. Bridget Perkins.

"We'll invite everyone for the wedding," his mother said, her grey eyes sparkling. "I can't wait to see them, it's been too long."

Alexander cocked his head and contemplated his mother with amusement. For all the years she had lived in Montana, she had never ceased craving the company of her relatives back East. The wedding would be an opportunity to have them visit the ranch. She had her mother, three sisters and a handful of nieces and nephews and several Great Aunts.

"Great Aunt Edith might not make the journey," his mother said, wearing a faraway look. "Her leg hasn't healed properly."

"She'll be well represented I'm sure," Alexander said, his voice playful. It was lost on his mother. She had not heard him, her mind on the weeks to come. He shook his head and stifled a chuckle. He hoped for her well-being that Bridget Perkins would get along with his mother. Margaret Baron had a heart of gold—as long as she took to you. If not, his bride would have a rather difficult time in Montana with his mother as an adversary. Alexander had no plans of interfering with his future wife and his mother's relationship. After all, Ms. Perkins was only coming for one reason only—to provide heirs for Windy Willows Ranch.

"Look mother, I have to leave. The ranch won't run itself you know," Alexander said and pushed back the chair.

"What about breakfast?" she asked, snapping back to the

present.

“I had coffee and cornbread. That’ll do,” Alexander said.

“Should I go ahead and invite Ms. Perkins to Butte?” she asked.

Alexander was already at the door. “Yes mother, do what you think is necessary.”

He was glad that his mother was too occupied to ask his plans for the day. Several hundred of the cattle were ready for the market and he and his ranch hands would be driving them to the slaughterhouse in Butte to be shipped off to Chicago. Informing his mother about that was bound to worry her, for Charlotte’s father owned the only slaughter house in Butte. Charlotte was always in her father’s office in the slaughter house as she helped run his affairs.

Alexander bid his mother goodbye and at the front door, he took his brown wide brimmed cowboy hat and perched it on his head. Before leaving, Alexander touched the belt of his denim trousers and felt the reassuring bulge of his gun. While wild animals tended to stay out on the woods, sometimes they ventured close to the pastures when they got too hungry.

The wind howled, shaking the Willow tree leaves dotted around the expansive front lawn. Alexander pulled up the collar of his heavy coat so that it covered his ears. He glanced at the gray clouds, overlapping each other and casting a gloomy mood in the air. Winter would be here soon and there was still much to be done before then.

His gaze swept over the lawn and the stone fountain that stood in the middle of the lawn. The ranch house was surrounded by cottonwood trees and beyond them a wide expanse of pasture. On the West of the ranch was a deep wooded ravine where Alexander had spent endless hours exploring as a child. His own children would do the same one day, he mused.

Alexander skirted the lawn and strode over the cobbled drive that led to the back of the house. He pushed open the swinging wooden doors of the horse barn. It was several feet long, with rows of box stalls. Most of the working horses were out apart from a few



mares and his stallion, Stormy.

“Morning fellas,” Alexander called out to two of his ranch hands mucking out the stalls.

“Morning boss,” they replied in unison.

“Need Stormy saddled?” One of them, a sandy haired young man asked.

“No, thanks,” Alexander said and strode to Stormy’s stall. His father had had the foresight to build the barns wide so that even buggies and horse coaches could drive in.

Stormy perked his ears and whinnied when he heard Alexander’s voice. He saddled the stallion and within minutes, he was out of the barn, the wind blowing against his face as he rode to the pasture. There was nothing like an early morning gallop to get the blood of both man and horse racing, Alexander thought, contentment flowing through his veins. His mind shifted to the day’s work.

The railway had eased the process for ranchers. In his father’s days, many of the cattle were lost during the cattle drives that took months. Much had changed in the last ten years. Cattle were slaughtered before their carcasses were loaded into refrigerator cars packed with ice so that the meat reached the East when fairly fresh.

Alexander spied the longhorns for sale on the southern exposure, four ranch hands galloping around them, their heads covered with bandanas. He made out his ranch head Johnnie Francis amongst the herd. Alexander rode towards him, nodding at the ranch hands.

“Shall we go through them again?” Johnnie Francis asked him.

He was a thorough man, one of the reasons why he had quickly rose through the ranks to become the head ranch, even though he was not yet thirty years old. His face was leathery, a result of too many hours spent out under the blazing sun.

“No, I reckon not much has changed between yesterday and today. We’ll just do one final count and be on our way,” Alexander said.

Johnnie galloped off to give the ranch hands instructions as Alexander positioned himself at the edge of the fenced pasture. Johnnie returned and cantered past him. He would be at the front of the three hour cattle drive to Butte. The cows were shepherded in his direction and as they trotted past him in clusters, Alexander counted them. An hour later, the procession of the large, rangy longhorns and their riders were on the cattle trail to Butte, the ranch hands whistling and hooting to keep the herd moving.

Alexander would go as far as corner's cross, he decided. He was not up to Charlotte's attentions but more importantly now that the mail order bride would be coming, it was best to see as little of Charlotte as possible. Besides, he trusted Johnnie to see to the safe delivery of the cattle. It was not necessary either to escort the procession but Alexander loved the cacophony of the drive, with the longhorns blaring angrily and trumping on the ground blowing up clouds of dust, and the crack of the ranch hands' whips.

The main road to Butte ran parallel to the cattle trail and at that time of morning, fairly empty except for a lone wagon here and there. As far as the eye could see, were miles of Buffalo grass which grew as tall as a man, intercepted by tall towering pecan trees. In the distance, herds of deer roamed amongst the grass and mountains.

Framed by hills of prairie grass, Alexander made out the large brown bodies of a herd of bison. His thoughts shifted to Bridget Perkins. She was probably cultured and used to city life. She would probably be frightened of the wilderness of Montana and for a moment, he felt sorry for her. Alexander knew no other life and he could not imagine living anywhere else apart from Windy Willows Ranch.

## Chapter four

“You’re sure about this Bridget?” Agatha asked. “We could reply to another advert. I’m not comfortable about this. Why would a mother send the tickets? Where is this Alexander Baron?”

Bridget shrieked. “You’re pulling my hair.”

“What kind of man lets his mother propose to his future wife?” Agatha ranted, ignoring Bridget’s complaints.

“I don’t really care,” Bridget said.

She was numb and had been since the train ticket and the short neat letter inviting her to Butte, Montana had arrived.

“How can you not care about the man who will be your husband?” Maud asked from where she sat cross legged on the bed watching Agatha readying Bridget for her journey. The train was due to leave the Raymond Terrace depot at two in the afternoon, which was a good thing as they had an hour’s journey to town.

Bridget shrugged. How could she explain the inability to feel anything? Or her suspicion that her heart had turned to ice, which never thawed whether it was summer or spring.

“I would ask for a picture,” Isabella said. “I can’t imagine being tied to a man who is an eyesore.”

The sisters apart from Bridget giggled.

“I just want a husband who is kind and who’ll love me and the children the Lord will bless us with,” Agatha said a wistful tone in her voice.

The man who would marry Agatha would be lucky, Bridget thought. She practically ran the family, ensuring that their household ran along and people did what they were supposed to. An idea came to her then and her heart leaped with hope.

“Why don’t you go Agatha?” Bridget said. “We could swap places and they would be none the wiser.”

Bridget turned to look at Agatha. Her eyes shone and she was still as a stone as she thought the idea over.

“No!” Catherine shouted from the bed.

They all turned to her and she dropped her head. “Please no. I don’t want Agatha to go.”

Agatha’s hands on Bridget’s hair stiffened and then slackened.

“No, I couldn’t. The Lord must have a good reason for picking you to be the first to go Bridget.”

The little light that had ignited in her heart went off. It didn’t matter really, Bridget decided. Eventually, they all had to go off to get married.

“There, that should do it,” Agatha said.

Bridget stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her golden brown hair was held in an elaborate chignon at the top of her head, a handful of locks framing her face. From what she understood, the train journey would take seven days. Agatha could be so impractical. It would have been better to tie her hair back in a ribbon, rather than the hairstyle that would fall apart in a day or so.

“You look beautiful Bridget,” Isabella said softly. “He’s a lucky man, that Alexander Baron.”

“You’ve packed everything I laid on the bed? Including mama’s wedding dress?” Agatha asked, staring at Bridget’s medium sized carpetbag.

“I have everything I need,” Bridget said.

“Shall we leave for the depot then?” She continued.

Bridget nodded, her head heavy. She trooped out after her sisters. Mrs. Jones and Sophia waited outside on the porch, the housekeeper’s face taut with suppressed emotions. She rushed to Bridget and pulled her into an embrace. Bridget then lifted Sophia and held her tightly against her body. Bridget blinked furiously.

The next time she would see Sophia she would have grown and

have no memory of her.

“Let’s go,” Agatha said gently as Maud brought the wagon to the front.

“You take good care of yourself now,” Mrs. Jones managed to say.

Bridget nodded. Her constricted throat would not allow her to say a word. She kissed Sophia’s forehead, inhaled her sweet scent one last time and handed her to the housekeeper. She angled her face so that Sophia would not see the tears in her eyes, and after one more longing glance at the house, she stepped off the porch and slid into the wagon front next to Maud.

She kept her gaze towards the horizon without taking anything in. Moments later, Maud clucked and the wagon jerked forward. Bridget gripped the sides of her seat to keep from bolting like a frightened foal. Everything felt as if it was happening to someone else. How was it that she, her father’s favorite daughter, was going off across the country to marry a stranger?

How had her life changed course so rapidly. Tears threatened to escape from her eyes. She felt a longing to talk to someone. She could hear Catherine, Agatha and Isabella talking amongst themselves in the back of the wagon. Bridget now regretted her decision to cut herself off from everybody. The four sisters shared a camaraderie that did not include Bridget.

She glanced at Maud’s face, contorted in concentration. They shared a love for land but they did not confide in each other even though they shared a bedroom. Looking at her now, Maud seemed like a stranger, strands of her rich red hair framing her face. Bridget sighed and looked away.

Her thoughts strayed to Alexander Baron, her intended. The skin on her neck broke out into a sweat. She had woken up during the night gripped by disturbing dreams of a faceless man sleeping in her bed. Her mouth dried of all saliva. She clenched her hands into fists and bit her lower lip. The thought of sharing her bed with a man

terrified her.

Agatha, ever perceptive, had asked her if she feared the impending marital obligations.

“No,” Bridget had snapped.

The truth however was that she was terrified. She pushed the disturbing thoughts from her mind and instead focused on the joy of being amongst horses and cattle again. The one thing that had interested her about Alexander Baron was that he operated a large cattle ranch. No matter what was expected of her, Bridget knew she would find joy amongst the animals.

The hour to town passed unnoticed, and before she knew it, the wagon was rattling into the wide dusty streets of Raymond Terrace. Nausea rose up Bridget’s throat as the wagon turned and the depot came into view. She clamped down a primal scream that threatened to escape.

“We’re here,” Maud said, as she pulled up at the depot and parked the wagon.

Bridget sat stiffly unable to move her muscles. She could hear the sound of her heartbeat thrashing in her ears. People milled in and out of the station laden with luggage.

“Come down Bridget, the train will depart soon!” Agatha bellowed from the ground.

With a deep sigh of resignation, Bridget joined her sisters in the street and together they entered the station. The platform was as busy as the street with people entering the waiting train. She followed Agatha down the platform until they stopped in front of a sleeper train.

“You’ll travel in comfort Bridget,” Catherine said, clapping her hands in glee. “Write to us and tell us all about the journey.”

Agatha, with a dislike for emotional goodbyes hurriedly embraced Bridget, as did Isabella, Catherine and Maud and before she knew it, she was walking up the platform and into the sleeper

carriage. Bridget stopped to stare at the interior of the car. It was more luxurious than she had expected, with four comfortable looking seats on each side and an aisle in between.

Silk shades covered the windows and a chandelier hanged from the roof of the car.

“Good afternoon,” a plump lady with a jolly countenance said standing up from her seat at the front of the car. “My name’s Mrs. Harold and these three are my daughters. We shall be travelling together.”

Caught aback by the woman’s friendliness, Bridget nodded curtly, after casting a quick glance at the daughters. Two appeared to be about her age and one was much younger, perhaps fifteen years or so. They had the same oval shaped, pale faces and wisp brown hair. Had she been a different sort of person, like Isabella or Agatha, Bridget would have enjoyed the company immensely, but as it was, she longed to retreat into herself and imagine she was alone in the car.

Friendliness inevitably brought questions that Bridget was not willing to answer. Besides, it felt odd to have someone speak to her in a friendly manner when she and her sisters had got used to been shunned by society for one mistake that decided their future.

“You can take that seat over there,” Mrs. Harold continued. “I hear at night it gets quite comfortable when the seats are unfolded into sleeper berths. I daresay it will be just like home,” she said with a wink.

Bridget moved to the last seat and lifted her carpetbag over her head and into the overhead luggage compartment. She sat down and deliberately shut her eyes. The last thing she wanted was to be friendly to Mrs. Harold and her family. She just wanted peace and quiet to get her mind to accept what awaited her in Butte.

She could feel Mrs. Harold’s eyes on her before there was light movement and a creak of the seat as she sat down. She popped her eyes open when a whistle sounded. She pulled the curtain open and

peered out, catching her sisters' anxious faces as they stood on the platform. Maud caught sight of her and waved vigorously. The train inched forward and Catherine ran alongside, waving and saying something Bridget could not make out.

The train gathered speed and her sisters became specks in the distance and then disappeared altogether. She only realized that she was crying when she drew the curtain and felt warm tears on her cheeks. Bridget felt as a chicken did when it was headed for slaughter.



## Chapter five

Much as Alexander dreaded meeting Bridget Perkins at the depot, it was preferable than listening to his mother go on about the wedding. The wedding ceremony arrangements were already in motion, the only thing lacking, was the bride. His mother had offered to go with him to the station but the thought of Bridget arriving to his mother's prodding questions would be too much for a first day.

Alexander fidgeted in the coach seat, unused to seating back and allowing someone else to drive him. The coach was mainly for his mother's use. He preferred to go to Butte in his stallion which took a considerable shorter time than the coach driven carriage. For the first time since the whole business began, he gave thought to Bridget Perkins looks.

There had been no exchange of photographs from what his mother told him but she was a golden brown haired young woman, of slim built and green eyes. It would be nice if she was easy on the eye, Alexander thought. There was nothing as disheartening as waking up to a sour faced woman every morning.

Without knowing, his thoughts turned to Charlotte Turner. There was no question of her beauty. If only her character had matched her dainty beauty. He had come a long way, Alexander thought. Once he had been besotted with Charlotte but she had had her eyes on Phillip Harvey, who had gone on and married another girl.

Charlotte had disappeared from Butte, apparently to nurse her wounds with her relatives somewhere in New York. By then rumors had been awash in Butte that she had allowed Phillip Harvey to dishonor her. When she returned to Butte after close to six months, Charlotte had not helped restore her reputation. She had flirted with everyone, including a rogue miner and a ranch hand.

By then, his feelings for her had ebbed. It was odd how less than a year ago, she had turned her attentions to him. It flattered him

knowing that she had finally noticed him and it frightened his mother so much that she had come up with the idea of advertising for a mail order bride. In honest moments, Alexander knew that Charlotte's interest was spurred by her passing years and fear of spinsterhood.

Just when Alexander thought he couldn't bear to be in the carriage a moment longer, they arrived in Butte. The town had grown by leaps and bounds in the last two years with fortune hunters thronging into town to try their luck in the gold mines in the mountains. He gazed out the carriage, observing more new faces than the people he knew.

Dust flew everywhere but it was preferable than the wet months when mud caked the surface of the road and travel was difficult. The train depot stood at the end of the main street and Alexander hopped out before the coachman could open the door for him. He strolled into the station, nodding to a few familiar faces and made his way to the platform.

People waited with apprehensive faces turned towards the track, their ears cocked for the rumble of the train. Alexander chose a spot near the waiting room away from the waiting crowd. He had no such feelings of anxiety and the only reason he was anxious for the train to arrive was to return to the ranch. He had a lot of records to fill into his log books. His father had seen no need for records and he had used his sharp memory to remember things he believed were needed to be remembered.

Alexander ran the ranch differently. Every calf born had its own record up to the moment it was sold for beef. He knew the profit from every season up to the last penny. The only trouble was that such extensive record keeping meant that he spent a considerable time in the library rather than out in the pastures riding his stallion and overseeing the ranch activities.

A buzz in the crowd alerted Alexander to the arrival of the train. Black smoke bellowed from the hills before the train emerged. The whistle rumbled and a murmur of excitement went through the people waiting on the platform. Alexander adjusted his straw hat and

for a moment, questioned his stubbornness at refusing to change his working clothes into a suit as his mother had suggested.

Well, it was too late now and Ms. Perkins had better get used to his normal working garb. It was a warm autumn afternoon and she would see Butte at its best with wild colorful flowers sprouting between the brown green grass. The train stopped precisely along the platform and the noise level went up. Children leaned through the car windows as did men and women, waving to their relatives waiting on the platform.

Alexander trained his eyes on the sleeper cars at the front. Soon, passengers milled out, shouting and embracing others waiting on the platform. His attention was caught by a rather large lady disembarking, followed closely by three young women. They seemed to be together. Before he could look away, a striking young woman with golden brown hair and a solemn but arresting face stepped down, one hand carrying a carpetbag. She stepped down in no apparent rush, looked the platform up and down and then made for the waiting room.

Alexander intercepted her near the waiting room entrance. He tipped his hat.

“Good afternoon Ma’am,” he said. “Would you be a Ms. Bridget Perkins?”

She searched his face and then apparently satisfied; she nodded and said nothing more. Alexander struck out his hand.

“It’s a pleasure to welcome you to Butte. I’m Alexander Baron.”

An eyebrow rose, as if she had not been expecting him. She slipped her slim soft hand into his. Alexander was unable to shift his eyes from her green almond shaped eyes.

“Thank you,” she replied in a flat voice and no sign of a smile.

Alexander frowned. He had expected more of a reaction. Maybe joy at reaching her destination and meeting her fiancé. She had an icy beauty which made him feel awfully out of depth. He usually

received a better reception from ladies.

“I hope the journey was not too taxing,” he finally said.

“It was manageable, thank you,” she said.

“Shall I?” Alexander said and beckoned to her luggage.

She handed the carpetbag to him and stared at him wordlessly and then looked away, disinterested. Alexander inhaled sharply and fought down his irritation. This was clearly a woman who had no wish to be in Montana.

“Let’s go,” Alexander said in a curt voice.

Her unfriendliness had caught him unaware and he had no idea how to behave or speak to her. She was a beauty alright but she emitted a distance from everything, as though she was enclosed in a glass compartment. He led her out of the station and to the coach.

What would they converse about all the way to the ranch, Alexander wondered as he entered the coach after her. There was no need to worry for as soon as the carriage leaped forward, she rested her head on the back of the seat and shut her eyes.

Alexander watched her still form, unashamedly studying her profile. She had a perfectly formed heart shaped face, with full lips and a small straight nose. Her skin was brown, a sign of someone who spent a lot of their time out under the sun. Alexander grew curious and frustrated. What sort of a person went to new surroundings and promptly slept?

Has she no curious bone in her body? Now he wished he had paid attention to the letters his mother had sent and received. Why would a beautiful woman travel across the country to marry a stranger? He had expected a homely looking girl not a beauty with nothing to say or ask.

Maybe she was exhausted. It was the most logical answer. Her body was too still for her to be asleep, Alexander decided. He shook his head, puzzled. He should have taken up his mother’s offer to come to the depot. She would have known what to say to get Bridget

Perkins talking.

## Chapter six

Bridget woke up with a start and sat bolt upright on the bed, her heart thumping hard against her chest. A soft knock sounded on the door again. She looked around wildly at the unfamiliar surroundings. She lay between crisp white sheets in a large mahogany bed. On the side, there was a wardrobe and a dresser. Next to it was a wooden wash stand and a pitcher of water.

It came back to her then. She was in Windy Willows Ranch. A wave of deep sadness came to her then and she fell back on the bed. She could not remember much of the ranch house but she did recall meeting Alexander's mother, a birdlike warm woman who had immediately led her up a spiral of stairs to this bedroom.

Bridget had only managed to change out of her travelling clothes before she slipped into bed and fell into the abyss of sleep. The knock startled her when it came again. This time it was more insisted. She cleared her throat.

"Come in," Bridget called, her voice weak.

The knob shifted and the door opened gently to reveal a middle aged woman in a servant's white uniform.

"Miss, pardon me for disturbing you," she said without entering the room. "Mrs. Baron sent me to check on you. It's going to noon and you haven't heard a thing to eat."

Noon! Bridget glanced to the window and noticed the bright light streaming into the room.

"Shall I bring a tray up for you?"

"No, thank you," Bridget said. "I'll be down in a moment."

"I'll tell Mrs. Baron. The washroom will be the room on the right in the hallway. There'll be warm water in the tub."

"Thank you," Bridget murmured and when the woman left, she turned on her side and shut her eyes.

She did not want to wake up and face Alexander Baron. She did not mind his mother so much. If anything, the gentle woman reminded her of her mother, even though her memories of her departed mother were scanty. Alexander's puzzled face came to her mind. She felt awful for him having seen the disappointment he had felt when he met her.

In the carriage, she had felt his eyes burning into her face and she had resolutely kept her eyes shut and willed herself to sleep. It had not been difficult as the journey had exhausted her physically and in the mind. What would she say to him? He would expect conversation from her and she just did not have the stomach for it.

Knowing she could not hide in the bedroom forever, Bridget dragged herself out of bed. Her carpetbag lay on the floor and she rummaged for a day dress. Gingerly, she opened the door and padded to the washroom. Twenty minutes later, she felt remarkably better after a dip in the warm water and scrubbing off the grime of the journey.

Energized, she picked off her travel clothes where they lay in a heap on the ground, folded them and placed them on top of the bed. She spent a few more minutes arranging the room, delaying the moment when she would have to join Mrs. Baron and Alexander for the noon meal.

When Bridget opened the door and stepped into the hallway, she was surprised to find the same servant waiting at the end of the hallway.

"Mrs. Baron said I was to escort you to the dining room," she explained. "My name's Harriet."

Bridget nodded, her nerves almost getting the better of her. She soothed down her blue silk taffeta dress and hoped she looked presentable. Agatha had instructed her to wear it on the first day as it would give out a good impression of Bridget's suitability as a bride. She forced her legs to move. It was silent as she descended the stairs, her hand on the curved bannister.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, willing herself to portray a cheer she did not feel. Inhaling deeply, Bridget followed Harriet past a huge drawing room and into the dining room. A huge intricately carved table dominated the room and standing against the wall, a side board and a fireplace on the corner.

“Bridget, come,” Mrs. Baron stood followed by Alexander. “You must be very hungry my dear.”

She closed the space between them, took Bridget’s hand and led her to a chair. Alexander pulled out her chair and Bridget sat down, keeping her eyes downcast. When she looked up, it was to find Alexander’s liquid brown eyes on her. He smiled.

“Did you sleep well? Mother was worried about how exhausted you seemed last night.”

Bridget’s mouth was dry and stiff and she couldn’t smile. “Yes thank you, I did sleep well.”

Mrs. Baron seated on Bridget left, at the head of the table frowned. “You look pale, are you alright?”

This time Bridget managed a smile. “I’ll be fine after I get some food inside me.”

The last thing she wanted to do was to eat. Her place was set and she lifted the glass of water and brought it to her lips. Just then, Harriet walked in bearing a bowl of soup which she placed in front of Bridget.

“I thought we should have the wedding in three weeks,” Mrs. Baron said, watching Bridget. “It will give you and Alexander time to get acquainted and we can send out the invitations.”

Bridget shrugged. Whether it was in a week or a month, she would still have to share a bed with Alexander.

“Do you wish to invite your sisters?” Mrs. Baron continued.

Bridget shook her head. “I’m afraid the travelling will be too much, especially for Sophia.”



Mrs. Baron's eyebrow rose. "Sophia?"

She could have kicked her shingles. Mentioning Sophia was a mistake. They would ask questions which she had no answers to.

"Yes, she lived with us in the farm. She's only three years old," Bridget said in a tone she hoped did not invite questions.

As though sensing her discomfort, Mrs. Baron moved on to the wedding guests. Bridget listened with one ear but every so often, she caught Alexander staring at her, first with polite interest and then mild amusement. He irritated her with his countenance which suggested that he could read her mind.

After breakfast, Mrs. Baron pushed her hair back. "Alexander, please show Bridget around the ranch, I'm sure she's looking forward to seeing it. You like cows don't you Bridget? You said so in your letter."

The tension of keeping a cheerful face erupted.

"I didn't write the letters!" Bridget burst out and immediately covered her mouth with her hand.

Silence filled the room and then to her utter shock, Alexander burst out laughing, a deep roar and moments later, tears coursing down his cheeks. Bridget found herself laughing too. She observed Alexander, his head thrown back, his hand clutching his belly as though to hold in the contents.

He was a handsome man with scythe shaped bushy eyebrows, a fine bone structure and some softness around his eyes.

"I shall leave you two then," Mrs. Baron said in a dry tone. "I simply cannot understand what is so mirthful."

Alexander got his laughter under control and looked at her with tenderness. Bridget lowered her eyes, stunned that a stranger would think so kindly of her even though she had been anything but polite to him.

"I would like to show you around Windy Willows," he said and held out his arm.

Feeling inordinately shy and vulnerable, Bridget slipped her hand into his and they strode out together. Alexander towered over her by at least a foot and she felt not herself but altogether a pleasing feeling. It made a change from the terror she had felt. They were not bad people, Bridget decided, the thought piercing a part of her that she had long thought dead.

“Will you need a shawl?” Alexander asked at the front door. “It’s a little windy outside.”

Her body felt warm enough and she looked forward to going out into the fresh air. Her skin tingled with anticipation. She had not been in a ranch for so long, it felt as though it was her first time.

“No thanks, I’ll do just fine.”

Alexander nodded. “We’re branding the calves today. Been at it all morning but I reckon another two hours and we’re done.”

Images of clumsy calves jumping and playing with hay came to her mind and Bridget smiled and quickened her pace. She admired the stone fountain and inhaled the sweet scent of manure and grass. The sun was out but it contained little warmth. Perhaps she should have worn a scarf; Bridget thought and then promptly discarded the thought.

She had a plan. She glanced at Alexander’s profile and prayed that he was not one of those men who forbid the women in their household to ride horses.

## Chapter seven

Alexander felt as light as a leaf as he pushed the barn doors open. He felt a wave of disappointment when Bridget slipped off her hand from his and then felt immediately foolish. They couldn't very well walk into the barn hand in hand.

His thoughts were dispelled as soon as he stepped into the barn. It was a hive of activity as two ranch hands dragged a calf by its front legs towards Johnnie the ranch head. In his hand, he brandished a searing hot iron, straight from the small stove.

One ranch hand held the head down while sitting on the neck and pushing the hind leg forward while the second man pulled back a front leg, immobilizing the calf. Johnnie placed the hot iron on the calf's black leg and the air filled with the smell of burning hair. As soon as he lifted off the iron, Johnnie grinned.

"Another good one, not the best but it'll do."

Alexander grinned and turned to look at Bridget. He caught her just as her hand flew to her mouth and she staggered out the door.

"Can't take the heat huh?" one of the men commented and the others made a jeering noise.

Alexander glared at them into silence before he rushed out after Bridget. He found her stooped, gulping air as though her head had been dipped in water.

"Are you alright?" he asked placing an arm around her shoulders.

To his shock, she threw him off and straightened herself, her hands on her hips. Her green eyes blazed, boring into him as though he was a stranger.

"How can you do that to innocent calves?" she demanded.

Alexander gaped at her unable to comprehend her anger.

"Branding?" he finally asked.

“Yes!” Bridget cried out. “It’s horrible and cruel.”

Still Alexander did not get it. “You lived on a farm didn’t you? Your letters said your father reared beef cattle. That means he must have branded them.”

“I didn’t write the letters!” Bridget hissed. “And no, my father did not brand them.”

“He must have,” Alexander insisted. “How else did he protect them from cattle rustlers?”

“There were no cattle thieves in West Virginia,” Bridget said, her features softening as the fight left her.

Before Alexander could reply, a smoky voice that could only belong to one person interrupted them. He swirled round and almost bumped into Charlotte. She wore an amused smile but her eyes were hard.

“Would this be the mail order bride your mother was so kind to tell me about?” she asked, looking Bridget up and down, before she dismissed her with a wave. “Surely Alexander, Butte is not so short of women that you had to buy a wife and a city girl at that.”

She ran her finger on his cheek, implying an intimacy that did not exist. “We had an arrangement, or did you forget?”

Before he could call out her implication as a lie, Bridget let out a cry like a wounded animal, turned and fled. Alexander made to go after her.

“Papa sent me,” Charlotte said and he stopped.

He closed his eyes for a moment and brought his anger under control. She knew exactly what she was doing. If she thought that she could come between him and Bridget, she was mistaken. Alexander arranged his mouth into a lazy smile.

“And what is it that your papa want?” he asked in a mocking voice, though a little worried. He and Mr. Turner had a very satisfactory arrangement but the portly man had a weakness for his daughter. Alexander treaded carefully with Charlotte, flirting with her

just enough to keep himself in Mr. Turner's good books.

He owned the only slaughter house in Butte. He also possessed a streak of insane anger and had made more than one rancher bankrupt after a petty spiff. He now saw clearly what a mistake it had been to flirt with Charlotte.

"Forget about my father," Charlotte said and then pouted. "I feel rather humiliated Alexander."

She placed a hand on his arm. "You had me thinking that we had a future together."

Her eyes filled with tears and he felt a wave of remorse. Alexander thought fast.

"Papa would not like it," she said and fluttered her wet eyelids.

Consumed with rage, Alexander clenched his fists. She was threatening him. He wanted to tell her to leave his ranch and never set foot in it again. Instead, he said: "Mother arranged it all Charlotte. I had no say in it."

He felt a fool for lying but Alexander needed time to think of a way of getting rid of Charlotte permanently without affecting his relationship with her father.

Her eyes widened. "You're not married are you?"

Reluctantly, Alexander shook his head.

"There then. Send her away back to wherever she came from," she purred. "I have an inclination that would make Papa and I very pleased."

Alexander felt exhausted. He looked at her with tired and aching eyes. He had been up early and now he had another worry to contend with. The other nearest slaughter house would take weeks to drive the cattle. He could not bear to think of falling out with Mr. Turner.

"What did your father want Charlotte?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not privy to my father's thoughts. He just sent for you. I reckon it's an important matter. I

can't remember the last time he sent for someone."

He contemplated her, noted her flushed cheeks and he knew she was lying. "Alright then, go on ahead, I'll be right behind."

She cocked her head to the side and tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear. "Now why would I want to do that when I find your company so stimulating?"

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Bridget stood behind the drawing room lace net and watched Alexander and the blond haired pretty woman gallop off together. Her insides twisted with an emotion she could not identify.

"She should not worry you."

Bridget jumped at the voice too close to her. She whirled round and stood face to face with Mrs. Baron.

"Who is she?" Bridget finally asked, turning her head to see a cloud of dust as they disappeared round the bend.

"She's just a girl who jeopardized her future and she would like Alexander to be the one to pick up the pieces."

Bridget studied Mrs. Baron's face, her mouth tight lipped and understanding dawned.

"Is that why you were in such a rush to have me come?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Yes," Mrs. Baron admitted her voice carrying a tinge of apology. "I'm glad you're here Bridget. You're an untainted girl unlike that woman and Alexander is lucky to have you. So am I."

She took Bridget's hands into hers. "You belong with us."

Something broke in Bridget. She had guarded her secrets for so long that now, they welled up inside her, like a dam about to burst.

"I'm not untainted Mrs. Baron. Neither are my sisters," Bridget said softly.

"Oh?" Mrs. Baron said, a guarded look covering her face.

Bridget bit her mouth and without giving it much thought, she told Alexander's mother everything. The other woman's face grew pale and once she even gasped, but she did not speak. When Bridget finished her tale, her cheeks were wet and her body felt light, as though a great weight had been lifted off her.

She looked at Mrs. Baron's face. The truth was that she did not care whether the marriage was called off. Bridget had no qualms about returning to West Virginia.

"Let's take a walk," Mrs. Baron finally said, her tone casual.

They left the house through the front door. Mrs. Baron pulled her shawl tighter on her shoulders and led the way. Unexpectedly, Bridget's eyes filled with tears. What had she done? Agatha would be furious! She was a fool and a selfish one.

In a single moment of madness, she had forgotten about Sophia. This was all for her future and yet Bridget had taken them all a step back. Oh God! What had she done? She barely saw where they were headed until she looked up and realized they were enclosed in a cluster of fruit trees.

"This is my favorite place in the whole ranch," Mrs. Baron said, her voice barely audible. "It's the one place I'll miss."

Mrs. Baron led her to a makeshift bench under a huge tree, its foreign leathery deep green fruits hanging in clusters.

"What is this?" she asked, momentarily distracted from her woes.

Mrs. Baron smiled and looked up at the tree. "It's a jackfruit. My father in law brought several seeds from his travels and only this one grew."

Her curiosity satisfied, Bridget sat back and waited for the remonstrations. She slumped back and wrapped her hands around her chest.

"Why did you choose to tell me Bridget?" Mrs. Baron asked softly. "Don't answer. I think I know why. You expect me to chase you

away from Windy Willows and you can go back to West Virginia with the excuse that you tried and failed.”

Bridget held her breath.

“We all carry wounds and burdens from the past. Yours may be a little heavier than most.”

Her lower lip shook and she bit on it hard to stop the sob threatening to erupt into a wail.

“It is not my place to tell Alexander. My thoughts are that you ought to confide in him, mostly to unburden yourself from that load. I like to believe that I raised him well. That’s all I’ll ever say about that business.”

Bridget covered her mouth with her hand.

“One more thing my dear,” Mrs. Baron said and took Bridget’s left hand. “We cannot control what happens to us and that does not make us bad people. You have a good heart Bridget. I’m a very good judge of character if I do say so myself.”

The sob she had been keeping in came out and Bridget sobbed in Mrs. Baron’s slender frame, feeling as though the flood would never stop.



## Chapter eight

Alexander avoided Bridget for three days only meeting with her during the evening meal. Even then, he avoided looking at her. For her part, she never made any overtures to speak to him privately and at first he was grateful. As the days went on however, guilt weighed on him, growing heavier by the hour. They were meant to spend as much time getting to know each other before the wedding.

“Bridget and I wrote out the wedding invitations yesterday,” his mother said conversationally. “I hope my sisters will come.”

At the mention of the wedding, Alexander squirmed in his seat. His head pounded and the skin on his forehead pulled away. He rubbed his forehead in an effort to ease the discomfort. Mr. Turner had hinted quite forcibly that he hoped that Alexander would do the right thing by proposing to his daughter who was so besotted with him.

The man had even gone so far as to suggest that their business relationship would become strained if matters continued unresolved. Alexander had left grim faced, his thoughts in turmoil. To make matters worse, a dinner invitation had landed on the silver dish in the hallway from the Turners.

“We’re going off to town today,” his mother continued. “We must have my wedding gown adjusted to Bridget’s size,” she said and smiled fondly at Bridget. “It is such an honor for you to wear it and maybe in years to come, you’ll pass it on to your daughter.”

Bridget did not smile and as he often did, he pondered on her sorrowful expression and the train of her thoughts. As drawn as he was to her, she was as much a stranger as the day she arrived. Sure, she smiled more and sometimes, he caught her with a look of such sadness, he longed to take her in his arms and soothe her worries.

“Excuse me,” his mother said moments later. “I shall go get ready and have the gown packed.”

Left together alone, Alexander made a snap decision. "Would you like to spend the day with me tomorrow? Much of the ranch work is done and..."

"Yes," Bridget said and favored him with a smile that lit up her face and rendered him breathless. "I'd like that."

She was easily the most beautiful lady he had ever laid eyes on, Alexander thought, taking in her eyes which hid so much and the hue of golden brown hair. He reached out and wrapped a strand of hair between his fingers and reveled in its softness.

He looked into her eyes and she quickly glanced away, her skin crimson. He dropped the strand regrettably and inhaled sharply.

"We have a lunch invitation to the Turners home for Saturday," he croaked.

He waited for Bridget's immediate refusal.

"Would that be the lady who came the other day?" she asked, her tone polite.

Alexander nodded. "Yes."

"Alright, if that's what you want," she said after a moment's hesitation.

*That's not what I want*, Alexander wanted to scream. The invitation was his alone but he did not want to attend without Bridget. She would be his shield and perhaps when Mr. Turner saw her, he would understand without been told in so many words that Alexander's heart was taken. End that business once and for all.

"Are you looking forward to the wedding?" Alexander asked. "I am. I can't wait to be a husband and wife with you Bridget."

She blinked at him as if in disbelief.

"I never expected to feel as I do when mother first brought out the idea of advertising for a wife. It's the best thing I ever did my dear Bridget. You're good and beautiful and...no matter what happens, know that my heart belongs to you."

Alexander sat back stunned at revealing himself when so much sat unresolved between them. Bridget gazed at him, her features tight. Then without a word, she pushed her chair back and fled.

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She knew it was coming yet when it did, Bridget had no answer. She shifted her gaze to their two horses, grazing contentedly on the grass. She would not look at Alexander and instead focused on the canopy of trees that provided a shade. Tired of looking up, she focused on the ground and played with the bed of pine branches that Alexander had made for them to sit on.

“You don’t have to answer that question Bridget. Just tell me that everything’s alright between us,” Alexander pleaded.

She looked up at him. “Yes, everything’s fine.”

He broke out into a contagious smile and her spirits lifted. A smiling Alexander resembled a framed picture in the library.

“The gentleman in the picture on the wall in the library,” Bridget said. “Is that your father?”

Alexander nodded. “Yes,” he said, his tone wistful. “He was a good and industrious man. He built this ranch from nothing.”

“You miss him?” Bridget asked. Her heart going out to him. “I miss my pa too,” she said her voice trailing off.

“What happened?” Alexander asked.

Bridget snapped her head. She had unwittingly said something that could open a can of worms, as her father liked to say. She shook her head. How she hated all the lying. For a moment, she was tempted to blurt it all out as she had with Mrs. Baron, but she dared not.

This was a second chance. Despite what his mother said, Bridget was frightened of losing Alexander if he knew the truth about her family. There was another worry, another reason why she couldn’t be honest. Charlotte Turner. Bridget had a feeling that the other woman was waiting on the sidelines for anything to happen and she would steal Alexander away from her.

How had she moved from wanting to return home to caring so much that Alexander married her? Was it Sophia? She thought of Mrs. Baron's kindness, Alexander's gentleness and she knew her reasons had gone beyond forging a future for Sophia. She had tender feelings for Alexander.

She loved Windy Willows. Here, Bridget felt she could make a fresh start with her life. Optimism flowed through her when she woke up each morning. The only dark cloud was Charlotte. Bridget was a coward. Had she been a stronger woman, she would have asked Alexander to explain what Charlotte had meant?

Bridget had lived the last four years in her shadow, afraid to rock the humdrum that had become their lives. If there was one thing that she had learnt in those years, it was that storms passed. Life settled back again into an acceptable pattern. The storm that was Charlotte Turner would pass too.

"Is that something else that you don't wish to share?" Alexander asked.

Bridget looked up at Alexander startled, and then relaxed when she saw his teasing smile.

"We're so new to each other," he said. "In time, we'll both be comfortable enough to share."

"You have things you wish to share too?" Bridget teased.

He did not laugh as she had expected, instead, he looked at her with sad eyes. To dispel the despondency in the air, Bridget jumped to her feet.

"I bet my mare is faster than Stormy."

To her immense relief, Alexander burst out laughing. He stretched out his hand to her and she clasped it. She pretended to stagger as she pulled him up, though he lifted most of his weight. Her hand felt so good covered in his large one.

"Now, I'll admit you're one of the best riders I have ever come across, but even someone with your skill cannot make that lazy mare

gallop fast.”

Bridget laughed, the sound of her joyful voice sounding as though it belonged to someone else.

“If only you had told me how good a rider you were, I would have given you our best stallion.”

“That’s alright. I like her,” Bridget said, gesturing at the brown mare. “She reminds me of Bugger, my father’s old horse.”

## Chapter nine

"It's not right to arrive for a luncheon riding horses. You look so pretty in that dress, you'll ruin it," Alexander grumbled as he saddled their horses.

Bridget laughed at him. "You sound like an old man."

He looked at her with mock seriousness, his eyes crinkled with suppressed laughter. "I am an old man. I'm five years older than you Miss. You better remember that."

"Alright old man, I'll be careful with the dress," Bridget said, glancing at her purple satin dress with pretty beadwork at the front, a departing gift from Isabella.

She felt pretty in it. It was odd how much care she put into her appearance. Bridget grinned. Isabella would be very impressed if she saw the time Bridget spent readying herself for the day.

"Come, I'll help you up," Alexander said and wrapped his hands around her waist and hoisted her up.

Bridget arranged the dress around her and took hold of the reins and then looked down at Alexander. Their eyes met, time stopped and the world faded, leaving the two of them, their hearts on their sleeves. Alexander reached out and gently touched her right cheek.

Her hand let go of the reins and rested on his. Alexander took a step closer, leaned forward and their mouths met, touching momentarily before they parted. Even after he mounted his horse and they cantered away from the ranch house towards the main road, the feel of Alexander's lips stayed with her. She felt enclosed in a heady trance, aware of Alexander riding next to her, casting warmth and light in her very existence. Bridget knew without a doubt in her mind that she had fallen in love with Alexander. He was an unexpected gift that she had not thought would ever happen to her.

She wasn't ready to tell him. It was too soon and she wanted to keep that knowledge to herself, get used to the feel of loving another

person and letting Alexander seep into her life so that when she did tell him, it was without fear or worry.

“Hey what’s the rush,” Alexander called out.

Bridget laughed at the realization that she had been galloping at a neck breaking speed. She slowed down and he caught up with her, their horses cantering side by side.

“Your mother wasn’t too pleased about my going off this afternoon,” Bridget said to him, her words dancing in the wind so that she had to repeat herself. “Today we were to go through the pantry. I don’t understand why I have to learn everything about running the house so fast,” Bridget complained mildly.

“She hasn’t told you?”

“Told me what?” Bridget asked.

“She’s leaving for the East after the wedding. Grandmother Sarah, her mother is getting old and mother wants to be with her. Now that I’m settled, she sees no reason to stay in Butte.”

Bridget was silent as she took in the news. A sinking feeling filled her stomach. The thought of her mother-law to be leaving left her feeling unanchored. She had come to rely on the other woman’s friendship and quiet counsel. Feeling conflicted, her first instinct was to turn back to the ranch and beg Mrs. Baron to stay.

On the other hand, Bridget was used to selfish reactions and she knew her first instinct was pure selfishness on her part. She wanted to live a better life, mindful of her loved ones. And that meant letting Mrs. Baron leave for the East without making a fuss about it.

“She’ll be visiting us,” Alexander soothed.

Bridget nodded bravely and tried to smile.

“Chin up, we’re here,” Alexander said, gesturing to a dusty, wide road on the left.

It seemed quiet as they rode up towards a sprawling ranch house, surrounded by beds of flowers. A long two story veranda

wrapped around the white house and unlike Windy Willows, it looked intimidating rather than homely. Unconsciously, Bridget's muscles clenched, as if aware that she was going to meet her rival.

Just as they rode up to the front, a groomsman emerged from the side of the house and after politely greeting them, he led their horses away.

"Alexander!"

They both looked up to find Charlotte frowning down at them. Bridget frowned and glanced at her dress. It had looked so fetching earlier but now compared with Charlotte's royal blue dress with a pulled in waistline and a flowing skirt, she felt dowdy in comparison. A portly gentleman with receding hair joined Charlotte on the porch. He too frowned when he saw Bridget but he was quick to change his expression.

"Mr. Turner," Alexander said and stepped up the porch, pulling Bridget with him.

The two men shook hands.

"Charlotte?" Alexander continued and then took her hand and kissed the back of it.

Bridget's insides twisted. He had invited her, she scolded herself. *Alexander wanted her here.* She was not a fool and she had realized from Charlotte's reaction to her presence that the luncheon invitation had not included her.

"This is Bridget Perkins and these are—"

She did not hear the rest of it, stung as she was by the impersonal introduction. By the time they were led into the dining room, Bridget was seething with indignation. To her further annoyance, she was placed next to Mr. Turner, who did not look very pleased himself, while Charlotte and Alexander sat on the other side.

"So where are you from?" Mr. Turner asked her when the first course was served.

On the opposite side, Charlotte and Alexander whispered



together and every so often, her voice rang out in secret laughter.

“I’m from West Virginia, in a town called Raymond Terrace,” Bridget answered.

“Oh is that so. What was your name again, forgive me, my memory is not what it once was,” Mr. Turner said turning to face her.

“Bridget Perkins.”

“Would you happen to be a relation of a gentleman I knew in West Virginia? He is long departed bless his soul...” his voice trailed off before he remembered he was conversing with Bridget. “Yes, where was I? His name was Frederick Perkins.”

Bridget’s jaw dropped. “Yes! That’s my pa.”

Mr. Turner’s round eyes widened. “What a world we live in. Who would have thought.” He chuckled. “Frederick Turner’s daughter in my dining room. We must drink to that.”

He called out to one of the servers. “A bottle of champagne please. We must celebrate.”

“What are we celebrating Pa?” Charlotte asked.

“Why, this is Frederick Perkin’s daughter!” Mr. Turner exclaimed beaming at Bridget.

Charlotte stared at her father, the name unfamiliar. Mr. Turner waved an impatient hand. “You wouldn’t have known him. You were too young and by then, our communication had petered off.”

The champagne was brought and poured into thin flutes. It was Bridget’s first time tasting champagne and it stung her tongue with its sweetness. Mr. Turner chuckled to himself and then turned to Bridget.

“You know we grew up in the same small town in West Virginia. Your father was a character when he was younger...”

Bridget spent the next hour listening to tales about her father when he was a young man.

“Did you meet my mother?” she asked.

“Oh yes I did. I didn’t know her for long mind you, before I came to the west to seek my fortune. She was the reason your father wouldn’t come with me.” He paused, lost in thought. “Didn’t blame him though. She was a beauty.” He turned to her. “You take after her my dear.”

“Tell me,” Mr. Turner said. “What is Frederick Turner’s daughter doing in Montana?”

Bridget was happy to tell him. It was time Charlotte realized that her marriage to Alexander was going to happen whether she liked it or not.

“I’m betrothed to Alexander sir. I came here as a mail order bride.”

“A what? I’ve never heard of such a thing. Explain to an old man how it works.”

Bridget giggled. Despite her rivalry with his daughter for Alexander’s affections, she liked Mr. Turner. She explained to him how they had forged a correspondence which led to her travelling across the country.

“My, a brave little lady you are,” he commented when she finished. “I never knew Alexander was betrothed?” he said eyeing Charlotte.

Her face paled. A vein on Mr. Turner’s forehead throbbed and darkened. He threw his napkin on the table.

“Charlotte!” he boomed and then stood.

He turned to Bridget, his face a mask of anger. He smiled at her and his whole countenance softened. “Forgive me Ms. Perkins. It was a pleasure to meet you. Your father was a gentleman and a great friend.”

With a slight bow he left. Bridget turned and to her astonishment, she found Alexander and Charlotte locked in a kiss, her arms wrapped around his neck and part of his head. She stared at them incredulously, frozen by disbelief. When her shock abated,

Bridget stood and pushed her chair back with such violence, it fell over. The last thing she saw before she fled was Charlotte's look of triumph.

She ran out to the back startling the groomsman polishing a carriage.

"Your horse—"

Bridget did not wait for him to finish. Her stallion was grazing on a patch of grass and in seconds she had untethered him and mounted. She galloped past Alexander hurrying around to the side of the house.

"Bridget wait!"

The rest of his words were swallowed by the wind. Tears of humiliation and pain ran down her cheeks. Alexander had lied to her. He was marrying her to please his mother! His heart belonged to Charlotte Turner! Why had he invited her? He could have come alone and saved her the humiliation.

She galloped blindly, the tears blurring her vision. By the time she got to the main road, the wind had dried her tears and her heart was a cold slab of cement. She had been a fool once but it was not going to happen again. In a moment of clarity, Bridget realized how easily it was for a man to get into a woman's heart and how easily one could falter.

That was how their lives had been ruined. Now all of her sisters as well as herself were paying because of a man.

"Bridget wait!"

It was Alexander and he had caught up with her. He grabbed her reins and brought both their horses to a stop.

"It was an act Bridget," Alexander shouted. "She wanted you to see that and react as you did. Run off back to West Virginia."

"Why didn't you stop it?" Bridget cried, tears flowing once more.

“I did, but you fled. When will you believe me? Trust me just a little? I love you Bridget Perkins! How do you want me to prove it to you?” he screamed, his voice ravaged.

## Chapter ten

She wanted to remember everything about the day, Bridget thought, looking out the window at the guests seated in chairs on the lawn, a wide aisle in the center. Her eyes lingered on the bundles of flowers tied to each chair. Mrs. Baron, ‘mother’ as she had invited Bridget to call her, had truly outdone herself.

Her eyes moved on and rested on Alexander, smartly dressed in a brown wedding suit and white shirt with a stiff collar, his dark hair brushed back and shining in the sun. Just looking at him, lit up Bridget’s insides. She chuckled softly at the memory of how unsure in their love she had been.

Her eyes scanned the crowd and rested on Charlotte seated next to Aunt Edith. No woman would ever cause her to doubt Alexander’s love. Their hearts belonged to each other and once a person realized that, nothing would shake a solid marriage. If anything, Bridget felt sorry for Charlotte for being shunned for a youthful mistake. Perhaps a man would come along for her.

Bridget returned her gaze to Alexander. As though sensing her behind the net, he looked up at her bedroom window and gave a hint of a smile. Just then, a slight knock came on the door. Bridget adjusted her veil and lifted the skirts of her court style white chartreuse gown and drifted to the door.

Mr. Turner stood on the doorway and stared at her with tears in his eyes. He held out his hand to her. Bridget took it.

“What an honor you’ve done me,” he said, his voice filled with emotion.

Bridget blinked back her own tears. She had fretted over whether to ask him to give her away or not. Alexander had not been much help insisting it was her decision to make. Finally, she had decided to just go ahead and ask and to her delight he had accepted without any hesitation.

“Your father would have been proud. You look very fetching,” he said.

Bridget dabbed at her eyes with the back of her hand. She could feel her pa’s presence and it was because of Mr. Turner. It made her feel complete having someone who had known her pa walking her down the aisle, almost like having a piece of her family.

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“It was a beautiful ceremony but I must admit that I’m glad it’s over,” Alexander said with a barely suppressed yawn.

Bridget chuckled and the tension she had carried ever since they retired to his bedroom ebbed away. He pulled her close and arranged her on his chest. Mrs. Baron. Happiness was a new feeling for him. Not that he had been unhappy but he had been missing out on the joys of life wearing his days like an obligation.

He shifted his hands and Bridget tensed.

“It’s alright,” he murmured in her hair. “I’m just happy to hold you my wife.”

She did not reply and he was almost falling asleep when she lifted herself off his chest and propped her hand on her hand and looked into his eyes.

“I must tell you something Alexander and if after that you don’t want me, I shall understand.”

“Hey,” Alexander said and smoothed her trembling lower lip. “Nothing you can say can stop me from loving you.”

“I just pray you still feel the same after,” she said with a shaky smile.

And she told him. All of it. Right from the beginning. Her eyes were dry but her voice told the anguish she had gone through. Alexander felt capable of murder as she told him. Instead, he turned round and punched the feather pillow hard.

“I’m sorry,” he said, seeing Bridget’s frightened expression. “I

had to do that since that I can't punch the culprit."

"You don't hate me?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"Hate you? Come here," he growled and proceeded to show her in murmured words and loving strokes just how much he loved her. Later they lay in each other's arms, content in their love for each other. Alexander's mind returned to what Bridget had told him. He pulled her closer and held her tight.

"You'll break my bones," she protested with a chuckle.

"I'm sorry," Alexander said his voice gruff. "I just want to protect you and keep you safe forever."

She heaved a deep sigh of contentment.

"Bridget my love?" Alexander ventured. "We could—"

She placed a finger on his lips. "No my love. Let's let it be. That's the past. The future is ours."

He searched her face, the light from the lamp casting shadows on her. He tilted her face. The shadow of sadness was gone.

"If you ever change your mind..." he said.

"I won't," she said in a firm, sure voice.

"Alright," Alexander murmured and kissed his wife gently at the back of her head.

**THE END**

Thanks for reading! To get an update on the release of Maud, the Independent bride, which is the next book in the series please click here [SIGNUP](#)

